



A MANIFESTO FOR ADOPTION

About CVAA

CVAA was formed by members in 1993 creating a structure for joint endeavour to enable a coordinated approach to placement pricing, developing best practice and working together in improving the lives of adopted children and their families. The membership has been at its most powerful and effective when agencies have worked together; setting the interagency fee, lobbying for adoption support resources and increasing the recruitment of adopters across the UK, particularly Black families.

Our Vision:

A modern adoption system across all the UK which provides lifelong love and support for all the children who need it, validating their identity and ensuring their early relationships are respected through to adulthood.

Our Mission:

To enable VAAs to play an active part in creating a system which is focused on the rights of all children to lifelong love and stability, supports their families and provides the choice of modern adoption for all those who need it, in partnership with others across social care.

About VAAs

VAAs are independent, not-for-profit organisations which are smaller than most statutory agencies and offer a personalised service to adopters from all backgrounds.

VAAs work in partnership with local authorities and regional adoption agencies across the whole of the UK to find families for children in care who are unable to stay with their birth relatives.

Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) have a wealth of experience in placing children with adoptive families. Some have been working for well over 100 years supporting all kinds of children and families.

VAAs provide lifelong support to adoptive families, their children and adopted adults through information, family days, counselling, therapeutic services and peer support. Many also support birth families and help with contact arrangements.

CVAA: A Manifesto for Adoption

Given the compelling research evidence that it provides lifelong benefits which exceed other forms of permanence¹, CVAA, the membership body for the UK's voluntary adoption sector, believes that the next government must recognise the important role that adoption can play for our most vulnerable children who cannot live with their birth families.

However, adoptees of all ages need our system and services to be better. For the benefit of all, and society, the next government must therefore also recognise the need to transform how current policy and practice supports both children waiting and adopted people and their families, throughout their whole lives, and deliver a clear and urgent plan for action.

This must include reforms which enable the adoption system to better harness the expertise and experience of the voluntary sector, particularly for children and families with the most complex needs, and increased support for adopted children to maintain meaningful relationships and to aid their transition into and through adulthood.

Drawing on the expertise of our members and the lived experience of the children and families they serve, this CVAA manifesto lays out a series of recommendation under five key areas which are:

- 1. Recognising the value of adoption**
- 2. Reducing delay for all children, but particularly those who wait the longest**
- 3. Supporting adopted children's identity needs**
- 4. Timely support which prioritises early intervention and developing more trauma-informed schools**
- 5. Acknowledging the lifelong impact of trauma**

Taken together the steps we have laid out can help not only make the adoption system fit for the needs of children in the modern era but will ensure that adopted people are given the support they need to help make sense of their identities and experiences and thrive.

¹ Research from CVAA and Sonnet Advisory found that Adoption yields at least £1.3m in net benefits to a child or young person, their families and other key stakeholders in society. Extrapolating this value to the total number of children adopted in 2021 yields a total value to society of at least £4,210.2m.

Why act now?

CVAA recognises the financial challenges facing local authorities and the wider children's social care sector, however it cannot be ignored that creating a more effective adoption system that delivers for children will require additional investment as well as continuing to drive forward policy and practice change.

However, this short-term increase in funds will not only improve adoptees life chances and outcomes but will also deliver significant savings for the public purse, including through relieving pressure on departments which are already under strain.

This includes reducing Local Authorities spending on foster carers and the longer-term savings generated by lower interaction with mental health and criminal justice services and higher rates of employment².

Practice and policies that benefit adopted children will also inherently benefit much larger cohorts of children in and out of care – including, for example, trauma-aware schools and improved working across education, health, and care services.

Most importantly, it should not be forgotten that our adoption system serves some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Most adopted people will have had a very difficult start in life, three quarters will have experienced abuse and neglect or violence. All have lost their birth family, and many have endured multiple moves through the care system under the care of the state before finding a permanent home.

There is therefore a moral, as well as economic case for any Government to introduce reforms that will give all children an equal opportunity to succeed regardless of their background or experiences.

² <https://cvaa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CVAA-The-value-of-adoption-report-final-Nov-22.pdf>

Recognise the value of adoption for children who need it

The number of children being placed for adoption has fallen steadily for a number of years and in 2020-21, the number of children being adopted fell to the lowest level in 21 years.³

This is despite the growing evidence that adoption provides lifelong benefits which exceed other permanence options for children such as foster care or kinship arrangements.⁴

The next government should therefore enable children who cannot safely remain with their birth families to experience the lifelong benefits adoption provides by ensuring policy and practice supports it as a valued route for permanence.

This should include:

- *Ensuring adoption is always represented in key decision-making forums, including those where different permanency routes are being considered, instead of just after a Placement Order is granted.*
- *Including early permanence as an option in all relevant cases to help reduce the number of moves children experience when coming into care.*
- *Supporting kinship arrangements by providing an equal level of support to other forms of permanence and through undertaking further research to better understand the outcomes they provide for children.*
- *Providing training via the judicial college to share the proven benefits of adoption for children and the ongoing work to modernise adoption practices, including contact.*

³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions#releaseHeadlines-charts>

⁴ See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8374623/> and <https://www.completrauma.ca/wp-content/uploads/C10-Adoption-and-catch-up.pdf>

Tackle delay for all children, but particularly those who wait the longest

There are a series of financial barriers to child-centred decision-making in adoption – not least the underfunding of children’s services for over a decade and the current lack of level playing field in relation to the interagency fee.

As a result, not only are children – particularly those who are consider hard to place – waiting longer⁵, but they are not always being placed with the family best able to meet their needs purely on the basis of cost.

The next government should therefore support the right for every child to be matched with the most suitable adopter/s at the earliest possible date, irrespective of which agency the adopters come from.

This should include:

- *Creating a level playing field in England for the interagency fee to remove barriers to Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) collaborating with the voluntary sector and help to ensure decisions are truly child centred*
- *Ensuring that all RAAs have a dedicated budget for interagency placements. The level of funding should take account of both historical data on interagency placements and an assessment of the types of children waiting.*
- *Ensuring all children have equal chance of finding the right family by reinforcing that there is a statutory duty to make all children waiting visible to all adopters after an agreed period of time, ideally no longer than 3 months.*
- *Consideration should be given as to whether children with multiple ‘harder to place’ characteristics⁶ should be shared with all relevant agencies from day one to help reduce waiting times for this group of children*

⁵ New data from Coram demonstrates the impact of this in practice. Looking at examples of cases where both the child and adopters are both in the system (with a PO and approved) the proportion of those children waiting over four months has gone up from 48% in 2019/20 to 78% in 2022/23.

⁶ Ethnicity; Disability; Needing to be adopted with brothers and sisters; children aged 4 and older.

Support adopted children's identity needs

The evidence for children maintaining positive and meaningful, lasting relationships with the birth families they have been separated from, as well as other significant people in their early lives, has grown and strengthened.

The latest studies also show that high-quality contact is closely linked with children's ability to make sense of their own personal stories and whole their emerging identities, and to develop a sense of understanding about who they are and what they have experienced⁷. Yet, across the entire care system, practice is lagging far behind what the latest evidence is saying.

The next government should therefore create a dedicated service and invest in digital tools to help support children maintain meaningful relationships and to have their identity respected and supported, which will also improve likelihood of adoption being considered for children.

This should include:

- *Committing to fund CVAU and Adoption England to create My People, a new service providing guidance and advice to all those involved in adoption around developing and maintaining contact with important people for adopted children. Providing training for current social workers about the benefits of contact, the options that work, and how to facilitate them.*
- *Commissioning by local authorities (LAs) of external partners including VAAs to better support contact, including providing more evidence-based support for birth family members.*
- *Providing LAs with funds to invest in digital tools, including those developed by VAAs, in order to modernise and improve letterbox contact and life story work. This will not only make contact for the modern age and provide greater flexibility to families, but it will also help more children with developing a clearer sense of identity through higher-quality life story work.*

⁷ See for example Neil (2009) The benefits and challenges of direct post-adoption contact: perspectives from adoptive parents and birth relatives.

Provide timely support which prioritises early intervention

Since its inception, the Adoption Support Fund has been transformational for children, and its continuation is essential to ensuring children’s permanence and stability in their adoptive families. However, it must be acknowledged that despite this, overall support from adopted people remains woefully inadequate, including within our schools.

The next government must therefore introduce measures which can provide more children with the right support at the right time including within education setting and at key transition moments.

This should include:

- *An ongoing commitment for the continuation of the Adoption and Special Guardian Support Fund (ASGSF) recognising the continuing need for families to be able to access therapeutic interventions. As part of this, the £5,000 annual cap per child for therapy (and £2500 for assessment) should also be reviewed in light of the high rates of inflation with the aim of creating a clear methodology for the fund to continue to increase each year as is the case with interagency fees.*
- *A commitment that every child placed for adoption has an assessed multidisciplinary support plan with a duty to deliver it. This could be similar to the current EHCP Plan for children with SEND and link in closely with schools and education providers.*
- *Equal access to the ASGSF regardless of whether the placement was made by a statutory or voluntary adoption agency.*
- *A commitment to increase mental health support and provision for adopted teens given the evidence that this can be a key period in their development and placement stability and expert support is crucial to ensuring a positive transition into adulthood.*
- *Mandating training for teachers, via Virtual Schools, on how to support care-experienced children and take a trauma-informed approach in the classroom⁸. This will require amendments to be made to the current Teacher Standards.*

⁸ New evidence from Adoption UK highlights that the current approach in schools is having a significant impact on attendance rates for adopted and kinship children <https://www.adoptionuk.org/listing/category/breaking-the-barriers> damaging their future life chances.

Acknowledge the lifelong impact of trauma

Evidence from Adoption UK's Barometer⁹ has consistently shown that support for adult adoptees is poor, with many reporting feeling 'forgotten and abandoned by policy makers and service providers at all levels'.

We also know that currently the process for adopted people to access their records is overly complex, bureaucratic and ultimately slow, meaning the wait can be years for a person to access important details their own history. This is simply not good enough.

The next government should therefore increase support for adoptees to recognise the lifelong impact of early trauma and loss.

This should include:

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- *Ensuring that support continues past 18 to recognise the ongoing nature of trauma and to be more in line with the support for care leavers.*
- *Providing more funding to support access to records and reunification services, including removing the age-limit to accessing therapy and investing in more dedicated resources for this work to reduce wait times and the current backlog.*
- *Supporting through funding, dedicated and specialist support services for adoptees of all ages, which apply learning from lived experience.¹⁰*
- *Issuing of a formal apology by the Westminster Government to those affected by forced adoption, in recognition of this being a key milestone towards healing and the adoption sector remaining relevant to public policy.*

⁹ <https://www.adoptionuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=6501ceec-87a1-4f03-ab7a-a5b2bcd62edb>

¹⁰ Organisations led by adoptees are actively sharing their lived experiences with the sector and the need for flexible life long support is one key theme.